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ABSTRACT

To exclude Afro-American playwrights from curriculum offerings leads to the erroneous conclusion that blacks have contributed little to the development of the American theater. In order for Afro-American drama to be fully appreciated, it must be performed and read as literature. It must be used as a viable teaching strategy, as a motivator for the improvement of self-concept, as a tool for oral interpretation, and above all as a medium for attaining information about the Afro-American experience. The plays written during the 1950s by Afro-American dramatists offer a wide range of possibilities for developing curricular programs in Afro-American theater. For example, two plays by William Branch offer many instructional possibilities. In "A Medal for Willie," Branch focuses on the racial attitudes of a Southern community and how blacks are affected by them, and in the play "In Splendid Error" he concentrates on the significance of making choices. The quest for identity appears as a theme in "Take a Giant Step," by Louis Peterson, which also offers many possibilities for classroom performance. (A selected bibliography of sources on black drama and black playwrights is included.) (MHM)

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AFRO-AMERICAN DRAMA IN EDUCATION: AN INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY

There is a significant need for all students in American education to understand the inherent worth and the intrinsic value of Afro-American drama. During the nineteen fifties and sixties there was a tremendous output of drama written by Afro-American playwrights. Some of these dramas, such as A Medal for Willie and Take A Giant Step, were highly acclaimed and presented on the Broadway stage. However, after a brief run before predominantly white audiences: these dramas were tucked away and placed on an isolated shelf seldom to be seen again. They were abandoned as though they were totally insignificant.

To say that these dramas appeared in the textbooks of the fifties and sixties would be grossly inaccurate. One need only examine in a cursory fashion the curricula of our schools and colleges to discover the omission of works by Afro-American dramatists. It is the order of the day that our students are taught the dramatic achievements of Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. However, the plays of William Branch and Ted Ward are not included in school anthologies. The plays of Clarence Day and Sidney Howard are being read and studied in English classes, but the works of Louis Peterson and Owen Dodson are not on the agenda. Students in American drama classes are taught the significance of Edwin Booth but not the cultural impact of Ira Aldridge.

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In play production classes black representation is even more limited. In many instances blacks have only been allowed to make substantial contributions as members of the production staff. Blacks in predominantly white settings are rarely given the opportunity to study or perform in plays written by Afro-American playwrights.

In Segregated Drama in Integrated Schools, Don Evans affirms the fact that there are few plays written by white playwrights that project credible character images for black actors to perform. White playwrights are often unsuccessful in constructing the kinds of roles that will give the black performer a positive involvement in the totality of the drama.

To exclude Afro-American playwrights from curricula offerings leads to the erroneous conclusion that blacks have contributed little to the development of the American theatre.

In order for Afro-American drama to be fully appreciated; it must be performed. Afro-American drama must be read as literature, as a viable teaching strategy, as a motivator for the improvement of self-concept, as a tool for oral interpretation and above all, as a medium for attaining information and education about the Afro-American experience.

The plays written during the nineteen fifties by Afro-American dramatists offer a wide range of possibilities for developing curricular programs in Afro-American theatre. One of these plays is A Medal For Willie by William Branch. This is a relatively short play, but its power is far reaching. The prologue opens as a janitor and janitress begin cleaning the stage in preparation for a school assembly program. They

busy themselves in placing the lectern in an appropriate spot on the stage and arranging the American flag in a conspicuous location. Briefly, the janitor seeks approval as to whether the flag is hung evenly. Unsatisfied with the advice from the janitress, he seeks the opinion of Mr. Taylor, who is a teacher at the Booker T. Washington High School. After the janitor and janitress have left, Taylor addresses the audience and gives some needed information about the purpose of the eagerly anticipated assembly. He informs the audience that the program is being held as a memorial service for the late Willie Jackson, who was a former student at Booker T. Washington High School. Taylor informs the audience that the War Department is awarding Willie a posthumous medal for bravery and the Pentagon in Washington is sending a general to present the medal to Willie's mother. The whole town is excited about the forthcoming occasion. Taylor indicates that the platform is all set for the General, the Mayor, the Superintendent of Schools, Willie's family and the Principal of the high school. Before the assembly gets started; Taylor encourages members of the audience to tour the town of Midway. He claims that the people of Midway are just like the folks that everybody knows.

The prologue serves as an effective instrument for providing the necessary exposition about the kinds of characters who will become involved in a gripping episode of prejudice, injustice and man's inhumanity to man. It is ironic that Taylor, who serves as the narrator, would say that the town folks are people everyone would like to meet. The antithesis of this assertiveness is revealed as the drama unfolds.

The play is brought to a dramatic close when Mrs. Jackson refuses to read a speech prepared by the Negro principal. The platform speakers are shocked and demand an explanation. In a closing speech, full of melodrama and powerful histrionics; Mrs. Jackson elaborates on the hypocrisy of the assembly program and the tragedy of her son's death.

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

There is certainly a case for advocating that A Medal for Willie should be taught as dramatic literature. Some teachers will gain enormous success in dissecting the strategic components that establishes the basic continuity of the play. Many of the speeches are well written and should be examined for their effectiveness. The speeches of the Mayor, the General and Mrs. Jackson are excellent examples of vivid character portrayal. The teacher who utilizes this play must certainly concern himself with the specific stylistic devices that Branch uses in achieving the totality of effect.

The following approaches can be successfully utilized in teaching A Medal for Willie:

1. The play should be read and discussed as dramatic literature.
2. Excerpts from the play should be read and discussed:
 - a. The opening scene between Mrs. Jackson and daughter Lucy.
 - b. The airport scene with the Mayor and the General.
 - c. The barber shop scene.
 - d. The entire final scene.

3. Explain the role of oral interpretation in understanding drama.
4. Composition activities can grow out of individual reactions to the play and the writing of character sketches.
5. Prepare the play for performance before a live audience and conduct a discussion on the quality of the performance and the overall significance of the play.

The drama written by Afro-American playwrights lend themselves well for oral performance. This element cannot be overemphasized. The use of voice and body are the natural designs that help convey mood, tone, personality, and character delineation.

Teachers often avoid the use of innovative strategies for teaching because they assume that it will require enormous preparation and expensive equipment. It is relatively simple to present a readers theatre presentation of a selected drama such as A Medal for Willie. The participants can include volunteers interested in reading a specific role. The students with well modulated voices would be excellent choices. However, the success of a readers theatre presentation is not based on the quality of a student's voice alone. The ability to project enthusiasm and a credible interpretation of character is far more important.

The use of video and audio recorders are excellent resources that can improve the quality of an individual presentation. The playback of artistic endeavors enables the reader to identify those areas that require additional practice.

In listening to other readers the student can become a critical observer and offer constructive suggestions that are helpful.

An equally exciting play by William Branch for classroom use or stage presentation is In Splendid Error. In this play Branch leaves the contemporary scene and explores a facet of the life of Frederick Douglass. In William Brasmer and Dominick Consolo's Black Drama: An Anthology, Darwin Turner's compact description of the play focuses on the structure of action that reveals Douglass' fervent wish to work toward the eradication of slavery. After escaping from slavery Douglass realizes more than ever the agony and injustice of the system. For a short time Douglass was a supporter of John Brown's endeavors in helping slaves fight for their freedom by attacking southern planters. A dispute between Brown and Douglass occurred when Brown decided to attack the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry. Disagreeing with Brown's approach to the problem, Douglass was forced to choose between unpleasant alternatives: To follow the course advocated by Brown and offer assistance for the destruction of Harper's Ferry would mean certain death. A refusal to help Brown would arouse suspicion of cowardice.

CLASSROOM METHODOLOGIES

This play should not be restricted to English classes alone. The broad historical references meet the requirements of the social sciences as well as the humanities curricula. The play contains some of Branch's finest writing. Douglass is unquestionably the protagonist and his speeches are excellent for

oral performance. Panel discussions and symposiums can grow out of an interchange of ideas on the philosophies of John Brown and Frederick Douglass. Students can be encouraged to explore the historical accuracy of the play. Another written version of the play by students where Douglass joins Brown at Harper's Ferry would be a challenging project.

The use of thematic units is another way to approach the reading of dramatic literature in English classes. The emphasis in these units is based heavily on the student's need to relate to the protagonist in the particular work. From this concept in the thematic unit stems the concern in recent years with Afro-American drama written on the lives of heroic black figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Harriet Tubman, Jackie Robinson, Mary McCleod Bethune, Marcus Garvey, Marian Anderson and scores of others. A great advantage for the use of the thematic unit is that it produces an impetus for collateral reading.

In utilizing Afro-American drama for the improvement of reading skills in literature classes, teachers should expose students to dramas with a variety of themes. This approach will enable students to examine critically the modes of expression used by various authors. In A Medal for Willie, Branch focused on the racial attitudes of a Southern community and how blacks are affected. However, in the play In Splendid Error he concentrates on the significance of making choices. The themes in each play are significantly different.

The quest for identity has been a favorite theme in American drama. In Afro-American drama Louis Peterson utilizes

this theme in his highly successful Take A Giant Step. In Black Portraiture in American Fiction, Catherine Juanita Starke was right in viewing Spencer Scott as a sensitive black youth who gains insight into grappling with the black man's perennial dilemma of adjusting to racial exclusivity in a society that is predominantly white.

A TEACHING DESIGN

Take A Giant Step is a fine play that has received little exposure in contemporary classrooms. Although written during the fifties its theme is universal. Spencer Scott's quest for personal identity is a familiar crisis that many urban youth have experienced. In teaching the play as dramatic literature; it is significant to note that Spencer's identity dilemma can be likened to John Grimes' struggle for manhood and self-actualization in James Baldwin's Go Tell It On The Mountain. Each protagonist is a victim of insensitive parents who are incapable of understanding the felt needs of growing young men. Take A Giant Step should be performed on stage to realize its full impact. The role of Spencer Scott should be performed by a youth who has enormous range for the projection of emotional sensitivity. The play can also be utilized as an activity for role playing and improvisational theatre. For example, after the play has been read; individual students can be asked to summarize the play in their own words. A new ending can be added, the middle can be changed entirely and characterizations can be altered. The class can discuss the various versions of the play in terms of their strengths and

weaknesses. For added variety selected members of the class can present dramatic portrayals of individual characters. Their dialogue can be improvised and presented as short dramatizations. Another approach that can be effectively utilized is the ^{"Mock} /Trial-technique." The class is transformed into an imaginary court room. Volunteers are asked to perform the roles of prosecuting and defense attorneys, and other characters in the play. A jury is selected by the class. Each character in Take A Giant Step is called to the witness stand by the defense and the prosecution to answer questions concerning the role he played in the alienation of Spencer Scott. The class can evaluate the effectiveness of utilizing this technique as a teaching strategy.

Some advocates of the teaching of Afro-American drama suggest that these courses should be taught in predominantly black schools. While it is my concerted view that black students should be exposed to the works of Afro-American dramatists; I am convinced that students attending predominantly white schools should be introduced to the works of Afro-American dramatists. White students must learn that Afro-American drama did not begin or end with A Raisin in the Sun. It is essential that they become acquainted with the wide range of philosophies advocated by traditional as well as contemporary black playwrights. They must recognize that there are Afro-American playwrights who mirror the literary style and architectonics of their white counterparts. However, it is imperative that teachers develop curricula that focuses on contemporary black drama. They should teach their students

that just as Pinter, Genet and Albee broke with tradition and embraced an iconoclastic view of theatre; there are also Afro-American dramatists, such as Baraka, Bullins, and Milner who are the practitioners of a new aesthetic that is as functional as it is liberating. I would like to share a personal experience that occurred during my tenure as a secondary teacher of English and drama in the Chicago Public System. As director of the high school drama club I was charged with the responsibility of play production activities. The time was ripe for a rendering of Lorraine Hansberry's celebrated drama, "A Raisin in the Sun" which has now become an American classic. The cast consisted of approximately fifteen students with limited theatrical experience. Many of the students had never worked in a group effort before. They were often insolent, arrogant and somewhat stubborn. The school population is predominantly Black and its student body is representative of students from both lower and middle-class families.

The rehearsal time allotted for the production was two and a half months. The cast met after school in the auditorium and planned the rehearsal activities for the evening. As director of the play I did not have to issue vindictive reprisals to insure the achievement of goals. After three days of orientation the cast was committed to the realization of an end product. During the course of the rehearsals each student became an integral part of a team. Their insolence, arrogance and stubbornness gave way to cooperation, decision making, problem solving and improved self-awareness. By the time the play was ready for mounting, each cast and crew member realized for himself a sense of self-discovery. I saw personal growth and a change of behavior in each student. Their values and attitudes concerning themselves were directed toward the realization of goals. The ability to assume responsibility and to work together in a group were some of the learning outcomes of this theatrical production. In addition to contributing

to the rendering of a fine performance of A Raisin in the Sun, each student discovered his personal identity in contributing to the completion of this dramatic activity. The sense of recognition and somebodiness achieved from their peers were adjuncts that assisted them in the maintenance of a positive self-concept in their associations in and out of school.

The students who were actively involved in the production of A Raisin in the Sun; returned to their academic pursuits with a greater interest in school achievement. The new values and attitudes that were fostered during the rehearsal sessions were transferred into meaningful curricular interaction. Many teachers were able to observe behavioral changes in the students who had performed in the play as cast member or as a member of the production staff. The new respect for the feelings and sensitivities of others was attributed to the group cohesiveness which is a prerequisite for the execution of successful drama activities.

The preceding account is one indication that the abysmal failure record of some schools in many of our metropolitan and suburban areas can be ameliorated through the utilization of patterns of black cultural perspective as reflected in the drama of Afro-American playwrights. These dramas, often neglected in school curricula, can serve as motivational resources for the enhancement of black self-concept.

Two issues that were of enormous significance during the late sixties in the teaching of Afro-American drama are still posing problems for some teachers today. (1) Who should teach the course? and (2) Should the course be taught separately or integrated into existing courses? George Kent offers a valid response to the former issue when he indicates in Basic Issues in the Teaching of Black American Literature that those individuals who achieve a high degree of success in teaching Afro-American drama are individuals who can enter empathetically and patiently into the broad

contours of the drama and into its history and the unique areas of its culture. Many students, both black and white are apprehensive that those dimensions in the drama that reflect the black experience will be avoided by white teachers and that there is a possibility that these plays, especially the Cultural Nationalist Drama, may place the white teacher in an ambiguous position, since it at times, assaults whites and whiteness. In responding to the latter query concerning a separate or integrated course, I agree with Kent that a teacher is more likely to do an excellent job of teaching the drama course integrally if he has experience in teaching the separate course. The "multi-ethnic" drama course alone is not enough.

Theatre arts teachers must utilize traditional as well as contemporary Afro-American drama as a resource for play production. Only a few of these plays have been presented as dramatic productions in our academic institutions. In selecting a play for production the drama teacher can no longer rely on old favorites. He must develop a broad familiarity with the total range of American theatre. Students in urban schools are certainly willing to perform old standards. However, they are also adamant about their desire to participate in the drama of "our" time. The responsibility of theatre departments is an awesome one. They can no longer get by with just a quick reading of a few plays by Afro-American playwrights. The school must provide students with a total theatrical exposure. Black students are often hesitant in participating in theatre. It is their opinion that there are no plays written for them and consequently why should they volunteer for try-outs. Sensitive and knowledgeable teachers must counter this belief by making Afro-American theatre available to all students. In order for these plays to stay in print they must be performed regularly. The drama teacher must discover and rediscover these plays and make them an integral part of classroom curricula. The view of utilizing segregated drama in integrated schools is now passé.

The major thrust of my position has to do with the willingness of textbook publishers to deal honestly with the black man's involvement in the American theatre. Our students deserve a faithful representation of the contributions as well as a legitimate scenario of black achievements in drama. Moreover, the publishing industry cannot operate effectively in a vacuum. They must receive support from textbook writers, teachers, school administrators, teacher training institutions, curriculum developers and professional education associations. It is the responsibility of these groups to develop legitimate rationale that will support the inclusion of Afro-American drama as curricula content. The textbook industry has recently made strides in cataloguing black literary achievements. I would now insist that they devote greater attention to Afro-American drama--the neglected literary genre--through a continuous publication of drama by Afro-American playwrights. The classroom teacher will not only recognize the legitimacy of the drama; but he will also make a greater effort to include the drama in classroom curricula.

Considerable work remains to be done in the area of Afro-American drama; particularly as it relates to the development of teaching methodologies. Teacher training institutions must develop methods courses that focus on teaching Afro-American drama in the secondary school. In order for prospective teachers to gain an understanding of the new curricula; they must receive a wide exposure to a variety of teaching techniques that will not only give them confidence in teaching Afro-American drama but they will hopefully acquire for the first time, a broader view of American drama and a realization that the dawn of grandeur in Afro-American drama has arrived.

It is incumbent that all teachers, regardless of philosophical persuasion and ethnic affiliation devote their energies toward the development of a classroom curricula that examines the achievements in drama of

all facets of our society. By focusing on Afro-American drama our students will be able to share the joys, sorrows, disasters and triumphs of the black presence in American culture.

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